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From the Nashville Business Journal:

<https://www.bizjournals.com/nashville/news/2025/06/26/bill-haslam-nashville-predators-bridgestone-arena.html>

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SPORTS BUSINESS

NASHVILLE IS HASLAM'S BUSINESS NOW

Former Tennessee Gov. Bill Haslam looks out on Lower Broadway and Bridgestone Arena.

KEVIN WURM



By Adam Sichko – Senior Reporter, Nashville Business Journal
Jun 26, 2025

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Story Highlights

- Bill Haslam will soon officially own a majority stake in Nashville Predators.
- Haslam and the Predators plan a billion-dollar overhaul of Bridgestone Arena's block.
- The former governor wants to see a different kind of ownership in Nashville.

Bill Haslam leaned on the terrace railing and took in a downtown skyline completely unlike what he saw when he first began spending time in Nashville.

Straight ahead was the prominent place where he will make his mark.

Haslam, who was [Tennessee's governor from 2011 through 2018](#), has reached a tipping point of his time in Music City. In a matter of days, the billionaire will [own a majority stake, 65%, in the Nashville Predators](#). He's [chaired the organization for the past year](#) and is diving into the franchise's [newly revealed billion-dollar overhaul](#) planned for the city block that Bridgestone Arena occupies.

The construction will be a rare visible sign of the presence Haslam has built quietly since leaving office. Another is the office tower where the Business Journal took his photograph: [the amenity deck of 501 Commerce St.](#), close enough to hear the early strains of CMA Fest's opening day, but high enough to be removed from the tourists. While in office, Haslam recruited anchor tenant [AllianceBernstein to move its global headquarters](#) from Wall Street.

Haslam put down roots right after leaving office, buying a home in the city. Those roots are deepening, partly because Washington, D.C., is not an appealing spot and partly because one of his three daughters lives here. "Ask any grandparent: Where your grandkids are is a powerful pull," Haslam said.

The Knoxville native – whose family owned Pilot Flying J before selling their remaining stake in 2024 – spends time every week in Nashville because of business opportunities. The biggest is the Predators: The franchise's valuation has soared 70% in the three years Haslam has been a part-owner, [most recently hitting \\$1.32 billion](#), according to estimates from Sportico. It's more than hockey, as the arena is one of the nation's busiest entertainment venues. Haslam is [bidding for a WNBA franchise](#) and chairing a select committee tasked with attracting some of sports' biggest events to the city's new football stadium.

In an interview with the Business Journal, the 66-year-old opened up on what drew him to Nashville and on a different kind of ownership that he wants to see



Bill Haslam stands on a balcony beneath the offices of AllianceBernstein, a firm he helped recruit as governor.

KEVIN WURM

You've been coming around Nashville since you announced your run for governor in 2009. How would you contrast what you saw then with what you see today?

Obviously, a whole lot more momentum. If I had the wisdom back then, I'd have bought property in the Gulch. Literally, at the time, I remember we had a campaign event at somebody's condominium in the Icon building, and you could see through it. There was nobody in it. That's obviously changed dramatically. ...

People ask me, "What do you worry about in Nashville?" Beyond the tangible things of education, transportation, housing – it's that enough people will feel ownership and accountability for what happens next.

It's interesting to be a governor, because you get to see how different cities approach things. Memphis' challenges feel more real and immediate. And because of that, you see a lot of leaders in the area who've stepped up and said, "We need to be leaders here. We need to be responsible for making a difference."

One of my concerns about Nashville is because we've had such a great tailwind that everybody's like, "Everything is going well; we don't need to do anything." I think that's a harmful mentality. Every city has challenges, and every city needs leaders who will stand up with a sense of responsibility to make it better.

It's an intangible.

Don't underestimate how important that is. Nashville's in a great place because, in the past, a lot of people have done hard things and made good decisions to get us here. ... For a while [more recently] it was, "Let's just put our sail up, and we're gonna catch the wind." Don't just always assume the wind's going to be at our back.

My dad drilled into us: If you're going to be in a place, and if you're going to profit from that place, then you better give back to that place. The Preds have been the beneficiary for a long time from a community that shows up for games when we're [challenging for the Stanley Cup](#) and shows up in years like this, when we struggled. We owe it to them to give back.

Does that sense of ownership become more difficult in a place where there's constant influx of newcomers?

Yes, yes. That's a little why the existing leadership needs to invite the new people: "Come on in, the water's warm, we need you here."

Without that, if you're new in a community, you think, A) "They don't need me," or B) "I'm not really from here, so it's not my problem." One of the challenges in a city that's growing like Nashville is, is that people feel ownership. If you're new or you feel like you're a new person, you don't necessarily feel that. ... The influx of new people can mean that nobody feels like they own it, who feels like, at the end of the day, I'm responsible for helping make this work. Because Nashville's done so well, I don't know that people have that same sense of ownership.

What role do you hope you and the organization can play in that going forward?

Where helpful, we'll weigh in. When the mayor had his latest transportation plan, we came out in favor of it. [We even gave money to the cause](#). If there are things we can address through our foundation, or on bigger issues, if we think we can help financially and it's the right thing to do, we'll do that, too.



Haslam was Tennessee's governor from 2011 through 2018.

KEVIN WURM

You left office in early 2019, and I imagine you were trying to find a new rhythm after-office. How did Nashville come into play?

The things you care about, you don't just all of a sudden quit caring about them. The things you put your shoulder into, hopefully you don't just care about those

things because you're in office. You truly care about them. ... You're here, you get involved, you make friends – you're not just going to walk away.

Were the Predators that first big swing that locked in that commitment, or were there smaller steps leading up to that?

We didn't see it as, if we find the right opportunity, we'll stay around Nashville. We were going to stay – and be involved in Knoxville – regardless. But the Predators obviously are a great opportunity. This organization's been just integrally involved in the community for a long time, so that made it especially attractive. It was something to be proud of, and that made it easy to get involved. It wasn't like this thing was a train wreck and we're going to have to fix it.

Professional sports are a big part of the community. Sure, we have a big ownership stake, but there are people here who live and die with the Predators. They were doing that before I was ever around, and they're going to be doing that after I'm gone. In some ways, the owners own the team. In a bigger way, there are a whole lot of people who wear gold a lot and care deeply. It's their team, too.



In June 2022, Haslam buys minority stake in Predators and unveils a three-year plan to become majority owner.

MARTIN B. CHERRY

How often are you here?

I'm here a couple of days a week, at least. It's a little more during hockey season and a lot more recently as we're working on this development here.

What part of town have you settled in?

We have a place just south of downtown that we bought right when we left office. We love it.

Crowded with tourists?

There's times when it's a Friday afternoon, and I still have work to do, and you're like, "Wow, what are all these people doing?" The flip side of that is, that's part of

the secret sauce that's made Nashville work. I want Nashville to stay that place [that attracts a lot of tourism](#). That makes a lot of things work around here. We're a sales-tax-driven state. We don't have a state property tax, we don't have a state income tax. If you want to pay teachers more, if you want better help for mental health situations, then sales tax is the key. When that bridal party comes in from Columbus, Ohio, like it or not, that helps pay teacher salaries.

What's your favorite restaurant?

We like places that are close, that we can walk to. My old favorite was Josephine, but that closed. But if you can't find a great restaurant in Nashville, you have a problem.

When you think about your future in Nashville, what are you building toward?

Listen, I don't 100% know that I know that answer. I love what we're doing here. The bigger development we're talking about, connecting Lower Broadway to [everything happening in Nashville Yards](#), we're the next natural bridge.

It's not a crazy thought that this retail entertainment strip is going to go all the way from Lower Broad up through Nashville Yards. That might seem like a long way, but it's really not. That whole distance is less than a mile. In the past, our contribution [at Bridgestone Arena] has been this big concrete wall.

I honestly think it'll make all of downtown feel like a different place when we open this up ... add a lot of great places to eat, and other great places to be entertained and to shop. You can not only extend Broadway, but maybe even change, a little bit, the character of Broadway.

If I can help with things, like [getting a Super Bowl here](#) sooner rather than later, I'm interested in doing that. That feels like a constructive place to put my experience to work. A lot of people stuck out their necks, and put a lot of dollars up, to build the new stadium. We have a unified commitment to make it work. Everybody's putting their shoulder to the plow to make that work.

What I hope is, we get in the rotation. So it's not that we get one Super Bowl, but we become one of those cities that gets it every seven or eight years. I'm 100% convinced that once we get that first big event, we're going to start seeing it continuously happen. That pays dividends for years to come for Nashville.

And I think when you're around a place, after a while, you see another place or opportunity you can help.

You'll help where you can, which is different than picking up the banner and being the tip of the spear.

Nashville has enough growth and momentum and opportunity that we're not looking for that one person to come lead the charge. I think that's one of the great things – we don't have to have that.

Sounds like you're feeling your way through it a little bit.

I have a really full life now. I'm not actually out so much looking for what's next. Between the things we're involved in here, and the things we're involved in in Knoxville, and having 10 grandkids, life feels pretty full.

What's the risk calculation of Nashville today versus the earlier versions of Nashville?

Any investment decision you make, you have to quantify the risk and decide if the reward is great enough. Historically, Nashville has been a place that has rewarded that, and this state has. We've got to make certain that keeps happening.

It's a lot easier to steer a car that's moving and to predict what will happen, than if you have to figure out if you can get that car started.

I'm still really, really bullish on Nashville. And I don't think that's going to change.

After politics

Here's some of what Bill Haslam has been up to since leaving the governor's mansion:

- 2019: Leaves office; buys home just south of downtown
- June 2022: [Buys minority stake in Predators](#), unveils three-year plan to become majority owner
- May 2023: Voted onto the [board of Ryman Hospitality Properties Inc.](#)
- June 2023: Announced as chairman of the Music City Host Committee
- Jan. 2025: Submits a bid for a WNBA franchise
- Feb. 2025: [Donates \\$1 million to endow a scholarship](#) at Belmont University's Thomas F. Frist Jr. College of Medicine
- April 2025: Endows a [professorship at Lipscomb University](#); announces 15-year, \$1 billion renovation plans for Bridgestone Arena
- July 2025: Acquires majority stake in Predators